DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 404 587 CG 027 038

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TITLE	Ethnographic Questioning in the Career Counseling Interview. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION	Canadian Guidance and Counselling Foundation, Ottawa (Ontario).; ERIC Clearinghouse on Counseling and Student Services, Greensboro, NC.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO	EDO-CG-95-71
PUB DATE	95
CONTRACT	RR93002004
NOTE	4p.
PUB TYPE	Information Analyses - ERIC Clearinghouse Products (071)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Career Counseling; Career Exploration; *Careers; Counseling Techniques; Cultural Context; *Ethnography; Individual Development; Models; *Self Concept
IDENTIFIERS	ERIC Digests; Self Awareness; Self Explanation Strategies

ABSTRACT

Since culture provides a direction for discovering a sense of coherence between stability and change, therapeutic change can be established when clients become aware of their cultural rules. This digest examines techniques developed for ethnographic research that can be applied directly to the career counseling interview. Ethnography assumes that dimensions of meaning in cultural experience can be uncovered through the study of language. Ethnographic interviews can be grouped under three major categories: 1) Descriptive questions, which elicit clients' thoughts on some aspect of their culture or world; 2) Structural questions, which generate the domains clients use to describe their worlds; and 3) Contrast questions, which are used to discover the meaning of, and the relationships among, the terms that clients have already mentioned. Because ethnographic interviewing is different from traditional interviewing techniques, it may be important to let clients know of this difference at the outset. Counselors should act as collaborators and should view clients as teachers. Likewise, specific principles and procedures inherent in ethnographic research should be followed, such as questions posed in cultural terms, the repetition of contextual information, and mapping tasks, in which clients visualize their cultural scene through the use of diagrams. (RJM)

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EDO-CG-95-71

by Elizabeth Bamster

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CG027038

ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE ON Counseling And Student Services

ERIC DIGEST

1995 EDO-CG-95-71

Ethnographic Questioning in the Career Counseling Interview

Elizabeth Banister

Overview

Cultural reality guides and interprets social behavior (Geertz, 1973). Culture provides a direction for discovering a sense of coherence between stability and change (Bruner, 1990). In this respect, the conditions for initiating therapeutic change are established when clients become aware of some of the cultural rules and maps by which they live.

Ethnographic research's rich heritage focused on some of these cultural phenomena. A set of questioning techniques developed for ethnographic research has been applied directly to the career counseling interview, based on the understanding that research concepts can be integrated with counseling skills (Gale & Newfield, 1992).

Discussion

Ethnography assumes that dimensions of meaning in cultural experience can be uncovered through the study of language (Goodenough, 1957). Even though some cultural knowledge is expressed explicitly through language, a large part is tacit or hidden from view (Spradley, 1979). It is through individuals' behaviors that cultural knowledge finds expression (Geertz, 1973). For example, prior to the feminist movement, women entering traditional marriages expected inequality in marital relationships. This tacit knowledge about gender roles and expectations would be manifested in various forms of the women's behavior. Incorporating ethnographic questioning within the context of the career counseling interview aims at revealing aspects of such cultural knowledge.

Ethnographic Questioning

Within the context of the interview, counselors can employ Spradley's (1979) ethnographic questions to help organize an understanding of clients' views of reality. I have adapted the following three major categories of ethnographic questions (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984) for use in a career counseling interview:

1. *Descriptive questions* elicit clients' thoughts on some aspect of their culture or world. A mini-tour question can generate detailed accounts of the client's world as it is lived out in specific everyday activities--the context in practice. "When you talk with your partner about your career plans, what would each of you typically say?"

2. *Structural questions* generate the domains clients use to describe their worlds. In conversation, people link key terms and phrases using words which indicate semantic relationships. Terms which convey semantic relationships afford a means for discovering connections among aspects of experience. In the following example, the counselor poses a structural question using a phrase "part of" to indicate a semantic relationship between two of the client's phrases ("feeling guilty" and "striking out on your own"): "Would you say that the phrase you used, `feeling guilty' is part of your experience of `striking out on my own'?"

3. *Contrast questions* are used to discover the meanings of, and the relationships among, the terms that clients have already mentioned. There are three types of such questions:

- Dyadic questions. Clients are invited to describe the difference between two terms or phrases. "I'm interested in the differences among the parts of being anchored.' What is the difference between `feeling guilty' and `feeling trapped'?"

- Triadic contrast questions. Clients are invited to describe distinctions between three terms or phrases. "Of the three terms, `there's no growth,' `feeling guilty,' and `like a ball and chain,'which two would be similar and which one is different?"

- Rating questions. Clients' values are discovered through the use of rating criteria. "Of the three terms, `irresponsible,' `selfish,' and `independent,' which one is the most difficult?"

Introducing The Ethnographic Conversation

Ethnographic interviewing represents a departure from traditional interviewing techniques.Therefore it may be important to let clients know at the outset that a different interview process will be taking place. This will ensure that clients' expectations for counseling are not violated. In setting the stage for ethnographic interviewing, the following aspects are important to keep in mind and to address with clients:

1. Clients are "teachers" and counselors are "learners." Counselors want to learn about clients' experiences.

2. Client and counselor will collaborate as they search for client patterns of thought and behavior.

3. Different kinds of questions will be posed throughout the interview. When appropriate, an explanation will be given each time a question is introduced so clients can adapt their thinking to the new direction.

Getting to Client Truths: Ethnographic Strategies

Aside from the question types described above, specific principles and procedures inherent in ethnographic research can be applied to a career counseling interview.

1. *Mapping Tasks:* Clients are invited to draw a map of a particular career-related experience (i.e., goals, relationships). Through the diagram, clients visualize relationships among aspects of the cultural scene. "You've said how you think family members influence your career choices. I'd like you to draw a map to show who these people are and how they are interconnected. Draw lines to show who talks to whom. What would/wouldn't be said about your career plans?"

2. *Cultural Framework Principle* (Spradley, 1979): Questions posed in cultural terms invite clients to take into account the socio/political/historical realities of their experiences. Because clients' concerns are often conceptualized in terms of linear assumptions, new meaning can be strengthened as they view themselves in context with others. "What might we hear other midlife women say about their career decisions?"

3. *Context Principle* (Spradley, 1979): Repetition of contextual information places clients in the setting and facilitates recall of significant details of experience. "You said your career choice was the topic of conversation during Sunday dinner. How did that come up and what was the result?"

4. *Self-Philosophy Questions:* Often, clients' questions and answers posed during the interview reveal significant aspects of their experience.

- *Self-philosophy opening question.* Clients are invited to focus on what is foremost on their minds. "What is the main question you keep asking yourself about choosing a career?"

- *Self-philosophy summary question.* Clients are asked to reflect on the possibility of a change in perspective. Further inquiry will depend on whether the client's question is the same or different from that posed at the beginning of the session. "Your main question was, 'How will my marriage be affected if I return to school?' What would be your question now?"

Summary

In relation to a career counseling interview, this present work offers clinicians a description of various ethnographic questions for pursuing cultural meaning. First, descriptive questioning encourages the telling of stories and clarification of clients' experiences. Second, because clients concerns are often conceptualized in terms of linear assumptions, structural questions that bring forth the connectedness of experience can strengthen new meaning and create a sense of coherence. Finally, contrast questioning can reveal deeper meaning and thus allow clients to entertain alternative viewpoints from within the cultural/historical/gender sensitive context. The key point is that the focus on language generates a different kind of career counseling interview, one which uses client language to reveal tacit cultural knowledge.

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